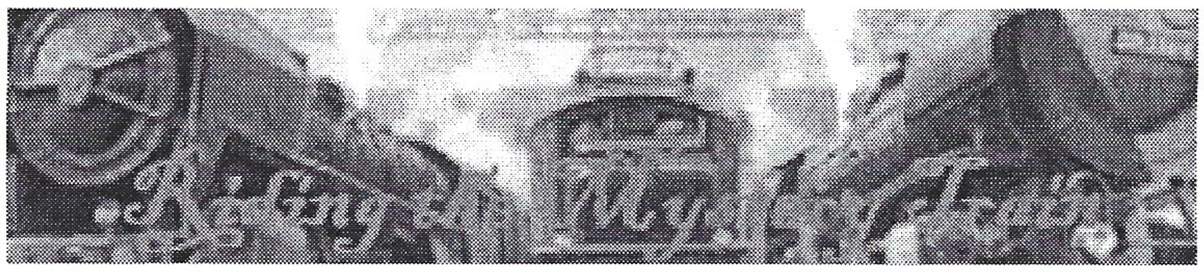

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Keeping time with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band

By Dan McCue

They are as much a part of that thing we call "Americana" as the crack of a bat on a neighborhood ball field or the smoke that rises off a barbecue grill on a July 4 weekend. For more than three decades now, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band of New Orleans, has been the embodiment of a sound as distinctive as the fabled port city they call home. Amazingly, had it not been for the devotion of a handful of fans, this lively conglomeration of traditional jazz, march music, and spirituals, could have breathed its last a long, long time ago.

"The Preservation Hall Jazz Band, as we know it today, really got its start in 1961," said Benjamin Jaffe, the bassist in the band and a second-generation member. "My parents, Sandra and Alan Jaffe, were visiting New Orleans on their honeymoon, and found it difficult to find traditional New Orleans music. "At that time, the music we we're playing today was long out of fashion. It was frowned upon. If people considered it at all, it was considered old folks music." The Jaffes didn't see it that way and in short order, made a like-minded friend in one Larry Bornstein.

As a side line to the art gallery he owned in the French Quarter, Bornstein had begun inviting local traditional jazz musicians - old timers who had a penchant for making spirituals like "Bye and Bye" swing, while also understanding the many shades of "A Closer Walk With Thee" - to perform after hours. Inspired by what they saw and heard at these informal sessions, the Jaffes became business partners with Bornstein, who soon gave up his art gallery intent on promoting them music several nights a week. In order to support themselves, Alan Jaffe took a job as the manager of a local department store, while Sandra became a typesetter at an advertising firm.

"My Dad's intention was to lease a building and stay in the business for a year, just to see how it went," their son continued. "However by the end of that year, my parents had befriended enough local musicians to feel obliged to continue the place." As luck would have it, the Jaffes' commitment coincided roughly with a revival of interest in the folk roots

More Preserv: Hall Jazz Band Intervie

of popular music in the mid-1960s. "People like the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton began talking about the people who influenced them, and quite frequently audiences discovered that those who had done the influencing were still alive and still performing," Jaffe said. Soon, the two hundred year old hall that the business partners had rented on St. Peter's Street in the heart of the French Quarter began to receive pilgrimages from a new generation of traditional jazz fans from al parts of the globe. "Pretty soon after that," Jaffe continued, "the Preservation Hall Jazz Band began to play out on the road four months out of the year, though usually for no more than two or three weeks at a time."

The original incarnation of the band - which is immortalized in a series of recordings made during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and featured Jaffe's father on Tuba - has largely given way, through death and retirement, to a new generation of Preservation Hall musicians. These days, only banjo-picker Narvin H. Kimball, born in 1909, is a holdover from the original combo, the rest of the line-up - Jaffe, Joe Lastie (drums), Dr. Michael White (clarinet), Wendell Brunious (trumpet), and Lester Caliste (trombone), are all young enough to be his grandsons. The sound of the Preservation Hall Jazz band has been described most aptly as the sound of an ensemble "playing a melody with a beat." It's a simple formula that has worked well for untold numbers of musicians in the Big easy for over 100 years.

Working together, rather than crowding the spotlight, the band's members create a loose and relaxed beat that's almost impossible not to dance to. All the while the melody, whether the tune be "The Tiger Rag" or "When The Saints Go Marching In," is "sung" by the various instrumentalists. "The songs we do are all rooted in the late 19th and early 20th century," Jaffe said. "They include spirituals, marches, pieces written for military bands, popular songs of the day, and are performed in such a way that they would be equally at home at a dance, at a brothel, or at a parade. It's still a very unique kind of music in that way." One of the ironies of being a world famous band from New Orleans is that no matter what town their in, someone is trying to steer the musicians to "this great New Orleans restaurant" they know.

"The truth is, we'd much rather eat the indigenous food if the area we're in. I mean, they try to recreate things... and they can't," Jaffe aid. You just can't find the best red beans for red beans and rice outside of New Orleans, and even if you did, you can't duplicate the Mississippi River water to cook them in." The musician lingered over the thought. "If we found food comparable to the food we find in New Orleans, there'd be no reason to live there, because in many ways the city is pretty inhospitable. We've got bad weather much of the year, hurricanes, mosquitoes... and New Orleans is built below sea level, so if we get an inch of rain, it's flooded. "We even have to bury our dead above ground, in crypts, so that the rain doesn't wash them up." In the face of those things, Jaffe said, it was the flavors of New Orleans that made it the musical hotbed it remains to this day.

"It sounds ridiculous - it once sounded ridiculous to me - but it was the

food, in addition to family ties, that was the reason most New Orleans musicians never left the city." "You know," Jaffe continued. "Things like Cajun food and such are all the rage now, but I truly believe that the spirit and culture of New Orleans could only exist there." According to Jaffe, the commonality the members of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band share stems as much from mind-set as a sense of history. "New Orleans has always been a good time city, because it was a port city. Sailors would come into town and they'd expect to be entertained. As a result, living in New Orleans, you are subjected to all manner of experiences." "I can wake up on a Saturday morning and there will be a parade going down my street. Now, in any other city, that would be insanity, but in New Orleans, it's typical. At the same time, it's the kind of place where a single meal can last for four hours."

In a very sense, the gospel spread by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band is summed up in those words. "When we look out from the stage during a show, what we're looking at is an audience that's happy, smiling, tapping its feet, and by the end of a concert it's rare that there's a single person left in their seat. "That's a nice thing for a musicians to experience - especially when you get to experience that without compromising your artistic integrity. that's why I think that as long as their are musicians playing who still embody the spirit, there will always be a Preservation Hall Band," Jaffe said.

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